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SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE FORUM FOR THE FUTURE

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Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

11. (U) This is a joint cable from Embassy Cairo and the
MEPI Regional Office in Tunis.

SUMMARY

12. (SBU) MEPI RO Tunis and Embassy Cairo Political Section staff canvassed MEPI and BMENA partners and other leading reformers in Egypt to seek their views on the Forum for the Future (FFF) process, per reftel request, in an effort to gauge the impact the FFF is having in advancing reform objectives in the Arab world. According to these civil society (CS) representatives, the FFF has made some positive impact during its first three years of existence, but has had difficulty supporting broad political reform, impeded in large part by the behaviors of several Arab governments. CS contacts in Cairo said that these governments have not taken actions consistent with their declarations to engage in democratic reform. At the same time, efforts by the G8 countries to promote political reform actually saw a backsliding at the last Forum held in December 2006. The CS representatives agreed that while the desire and rationale of the USG to promote democratic reform as a top BMENA policy goal has been strengthened rather than weakened by the FFF process, the results so far have not matched the initial good intentions. End summary.

13. (SBU) In late April 2007, Embassy Cairo POL staff, joined by visiting MEPI Tunis RO senior LES, met more than a dozen experts from Egyptian civil society to discuss the accomplishments and efficacy of the FFF process. The Egyptian contacts included: Saad Eddin Ibrahim (Ibn Khaldun Center); Hafez Abou Seada (Egyptian Organization for Human Rights); Gamal Abdel Gawad, Ayman Abdel Wahab, and Khalil Anany (all of Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies); Bahey Eddin Hassen and Moatez Al Fogary (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies); Amany Kandil (Arab Network for NGOs); Nasser Amin (Arab Center for the Independence of the Judiciary and the Legal Profession); Azza Soliman (Center of Women,s Legal

Assistance); Ahmed Samieh (Andalus Institute for Tolerance); Ihab Salam (United Group); Said Abdel Hafez (Moltaka Organization); Salah Soliman (Al Nageeb Center); and Gamal Barakat (Arab Center for Democracy and Human Rights). A summary of their views and recommendations follow.

REVITALIZE RATHER THAN RELINQUISH THE FORUM

¶4. (SBU) Most of the CS experts consulted recognized the positive impact of the Forum in fostering democratic reform, in varying degrees, across the region. One noted that the process has contributed to promoting dialogue between civil society and governments, while another said that the FFF has created a new regional dynamic which positively influences the local political environment. Others observed that there is a growing significance internationally to democracy promotion in MENA countries. As one CS expert said: "Given that the reform initiative was created in response to calls for political, economic, and social reform emanating from the MENA region, civil society groups would like to save and strengthen the Forum as its centerpiece."

¶5. (SBU) That said, some CS representatives noted that there is no sense of continuity or follow-up from one Forum to the next. They lamented a lack of implementation of the recommendations adopted in previous years. All of the activists voiced concern that recommendations from the third Forum appear remarkably similar to those from the first two, instead of building on work already accomplished and resulting in additional concrete actions. This lack of continuity and follow-through has enabled governments to

CAIRO 00001339 002 OF 003

"pretend" to support reform, with public displays of rhetoric, rather than building platforms to establish tangible results. To date, there has been little serious follow-up, according to the Egyptian CS activists, on the recommendations put forth during the CS parallel meetings.

¶6. (SBU) Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Egyptian activists agreed that the FFF has put pressure on authoritarian Arab regimes to discuss reform. They urged the USG and other G8 countries to build on these gains and to continue engaging with Arab leaders, rather than relinquishing the process. They added that building on achievements already made will provide hope to CS organizations, most of which still believe that the FFF process presents the only regional framework where these groups can discuss reform issues in the presence of their governments and at the ministerial level.

USG COMMITMENT AND CREDIBILITY QUESTIONED

¶7. (SBU) While those consulted agreed that the Forum's distinctive relationship with civil society is the main reason many NGOs in the Arab world have welcomed it--and taken the initiative to stage parallel CS meetings--they also feared that the way the USG is currently handling the FFF sends the wrong message to the region. The USG, they said, is no longer giving high-level attention to the FFF, particularly compared to the priority we placed on the process during the first two forums held in Rabat and Manama.

¶8. (SBU) CS activists underlined the importance of enhancing the momentum gained on the reform agenda through the FFF, yet wondered if the USG and others were willing to work with civil society to implement previous recommendations. They also questioned whether the G8 countries still see real value in continuing this process. Some contacts expressed dismay at the lack of follow-up to the first two Forums) on the part of both governments and

civil society. As one activist said, "The recommendations we have so far need to be turned into practical project plans, time-bound and tailored according to specific country needs."

¶9. (SBU) Among CS representatives in Cairo, attitudes toward the USG in general have worsened over the past year, with U.S. foreign policy and actions taken toward Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and the Palestinians as the chief reasons for this decline in esteem. They see the war in Iraq and the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict as having significant negative impact on the credibility of USG. CS experts said that the failure to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict prevents the United States from gaining credibility as an advocate of democracy in the Middle East. Even liberal Arabs, they said, perceive claims by the United States that it wants democracy in the Middle East as hypocritical, pointing to what they see as American indifference to the rights of the Palestinians and unconditional support for Israel. Until this credibility is restored, they added, Washington's effort to stimulate democratization and political reform in the region will be severely constrained.

CS RECOMMENDATIONS

¶10. (SBU) The CS representatives cited a lack of information among Arab CS groups on the substance and planning for upcoming FFF events, stating that none of them--or other activists they had spoken with-- have so far received materials about the process from official sources. They lament that they depend on unofficial, informal networking with other contacts or published reports in the Arab media--both unreliable sources at best--to learn about new FFF developments. They urged the USG and other G8 countries to consider establishing a permanent secretariat to

CAIRO 00001339 003 OF 003

provide information, including background papers and other reports, through a central website, database, or regular newsletter.

¶11. (BU) They also asserted the importance of establishing mechanisms to ensure sufficient preparation for both the FFF ministerial and the parallel CS event. All the Cairo activists support holding a consultative meeting with local CS organizations in order to share their opinions on all issues related to the process, such as the agenda for the next meetings, topics of discussion, representatives and follow-on procedures. In addition, most activists argued that there is an urgent need to address the organization of the CS parallel event, in tandem with the FFF.

¶12. (SBU) Although Egyptian CS leaders said that civil society groups across the region welcomed the establishment of the Foundation for the Future (i.e., the grant-making organization affiliated with the Forum), they also expressed confusion over whether and when it would become fully operational. Some of the CS representatives said that much of the euphoria at the launching of the Foundation in Manama more than a year ago, with its promise of technical and financial support, had faded--particularly in the face of its slow formation, recent resignations of board members, and the prospect of a "competing" foundation funded by the Government of Qatar. To regain lost footing, they urged that the USG should support the Foundation to become visibly active as soon as possible.

¶13. (SBU) Finally, Egyptian activists acknowledged that it may prove impossible to reach consensus on who should be considered the "legitimate" representatives of civil society in the Arab world. Most agreed, however, on the necessity of inviting leaders from a range of CS organizations, based on such conditions as strong CVs, documented achievements, well-respected reputations, and/or published papers on relevant topics. As one Cairo contact said, "Credible NGOs,

national platforms or federations, and regional networks should be properly involved." Another noted that "while Islamist organizations might only participate in CS events to undermine the effort and put an end to international support to reform in the region, many Arab democracy activists believe that we should allow the Islamists' participation also."

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) Speaking with these leading Egyptian civil society representatives, it became clear that the "democracy deficit" in Arab countries remains a major concern for them and, despite the many weaknesses thus far of the Forum for the Future, there continues to be a hunger to revitalize this process by reconsidering strategic visions and adjusting current policy agendas. The Cairo activists stressed almost unanimously that the time has come to bring together different actors from across the region to evaluate and redefine the FFF, reconstituting it as a key tool for promoting reform across the region.
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